I Cut My Finger by Stuart Ross

Reviewed by Clint Burnham

Lacan once said that the perfect complement to a castrated man was an incredibly beautiful woman, since each would have what the other lacked. If this is so, then Stuart Ross deserves a roll in the hay with a goddess, with Charlize Theron or Parker Posey, for, as the title of his new poetry collection, *I Cut My Finger* (Anvil, 2007) suggests, Ross gives up everything he can afford to in writing his poems. And there's more Lacanian grist for the mill in that title, of course, as it alludes to the Mel Brooks quote: "Tragedy is when I cut my finger, comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die." That is to say, what Ross's title (and I'll get to the poem with that title in a minute), what Ross's book's title signifies is our inescapable narcissism – what happens to me is *always* more important than what happens to you. And yet – and yet, what happens to us never really happens to us, or to me, for there also is no us or me or I except in language, in the poems, in that relation with the other (Stuart Ross, we will see, is the Big Other of small press).

Let's dive into a poem, shall we, and see how this works out. The poem "I cut my finger" works with a number of reversals, of deflations, of unexpected minor happenstances and unexpected major philosophical thoughts. It begins with the banal:

> A mountain was on the ground.
> I don't know how it got there, probably a thing
> regarding the earth.

This is Ross's trademark use of simple language and self-deprecation (hence the castration thing I'm fixated on), which all of it conceals an immediate profundity: the idea of a mountain being *on* the ground, as opposed to, say, *being* the ground. That is, the mountain here, in this poem, is the monstrous Thing of Lacan, that manifestation of the Real, the harbinger of desire, the *objet petit a*. For this is the mountain regarding which

> I thought
> maybe Mom and Dad and Owen would be there,
> or at least floating above it.

– Ross has included his dead parents and brother, a common enough trope in his work of the past decade as his family started passing away. (Most notoriously, in a nod to how his father had to "anglicize" [celticize?] his name Razovsky, Ross published a book in 2001 titled *Razovsky at Peace.*) Indeed, the floating here, and my polite euphemism of "passing away" are overdetermined, as in the Jewish high holiday/tradition of passover, which Ross alludes to in "Passed Over" (in *Hey, Crumbling Balcony!* [2003]). The mountain is a marker for Ross's family's absence, for his desire to see his family again, a desire that can never be attained, and thus that can remain as a desire, authorizing the poem.

In the poem's second stanza:

I tried calling Dana but there wasn't any phone
and I cut my finger
dialing a rock.

So the tragedy that is entailed here is not merely the narcissistic thesis of Brooks, but inextricably bound up in the other, the desire for the other, not only for the dead, but the living, and for the symptom of the living, of the other, the symptom-as-technology (the dated, rotary-dial, phone), which here has its stand-in as, again, the monstrous Thing, the rock that is the mountain.

Indeed, this desire continues to be staged here:

dialing a rock. The bad thing was
there was nobody up there,
and nobody floating above.
Not even a store when I felt like Chiclets.

But desire is about to encounter the Real, and indeed displays fear and trembling:

… I sat down and got ready to think:
and then I thought: I thought that for me
mountains are big solid things poking into the air,
like at god,
but for people for whom solid
is the absence of solid,
then they've got upside-down mountains
pointing towards earth.

As I said above, Ross gives up almost everything he can afford to in writing his poems – indeed, his years as a punching bag for every freak on Toronto's Yonge Street (in the 80s and early 90s he sold his self-published chapbooks on the street, 7,000 of them by his count) have toughened him up, and, since his father met his mother when he challenged an anti-semite in 1940s Toronto, Ross, we can be sure, is one tough Jew.

A word on Ross's ethics. A tireless activist in the literary field of small press (as I argued fifteen years ago in *West Coast Line*), Ross has edited, published, collected, contributed to, been excluded from, reviewed in, been reviewed in, and criticized virtually every material (and virtual) form of textual production, from self-stapled pamphlets to corporate textbooks, Canada Council pimped magazines to blogs, *Harper's* to *The Globe and Mail*, Coach House to his own Proper Tales, *Mondo Hunkamooga* to *Who Torched Rancho Diablo* to Harlequin Romances (from which he "appropriated" the *Rancho* title). Like his co-religionist, Ross is the "subject supposed to know" of small press. And so, unlike the "typical" small press zinester (to wax Lukacsean for a moment), who disingenuously avers that he/she is just interested in helping the community, *man*, Ross instead ingeniously proclaims his desire, his lust-for-power, in the 2001 pamphlet, "I Am the King of Poetry." There, in true super-ego fashion, Ross declares (it is

performative, a speech-act) that he is “the king of poetry. I can make or break you.” Power in the literary world is both a matter of production but also one of arbitration. Poetry king as ward boss. As Big Other, in the sense that “You will not write a haiku before I give the thumbs-up.” That is, Ross’s satiric poem envisions poetry as a system, a structure of power and production that is eventually all filed, in greedy fashion (more narcissism), so that “everything is under ‘R’. Under ‘Ross’”. In fact, at the level of the name, Ross’s politics (of the small press) and poetics can be divided into two tendencies (or, rather, they divide themselves, as language, at the level of the letter): “Ross” is the libidinal superego tendency, while “Razovsky” is the Old Testament superego.

A similar bifurcation can be found in terms of how tragedy figures in Ross: as either (or both) revolution (the political) or the ethical (the philosophical/psychoanalytic). In the mock-epic “Sitting by the Judas Hole” (in *Farmer Gloomy’s New Hybrid* [1999]), he writes:

> The front of my shirt is bloodied.
> I am aghast – I’ve just had it dry-cleaned.
> I have the receipt to prove it.
> Please replace my door. (31)

The effect of tragedy – the bloody shirt – is deflated (dry-cleaning anxiety) but in a pragmatic way (he still wants his door fixed). By this reckoning, Ross’s is a psychoanalytic art – blood is a *stain* (Ross studied with Robin Wood, the film critic well known for his exegeses of Hitchcock and Haneke).

But, then, we also see in Ross a sense of the tragic that is more social, more to do with the revolution. Again, we can turn to a pamphlet for confirmation: “the big chair”, from 1999 (written and published during the publicity tour for *Farmer Gloomy’s New Hybrid*).
The bulk of the poem reads:

> A man causes chaos in his house.
> His family flees, finds shelter.
> Here there is much light.
> Here the clocks function.
> Here the children learn to hunt.
> Meals are served on plates.
> The earth does not shift.
> A woman has a hat of fruit;
> she sings into a microphone.
> Each morning a calf is born.
> Children may select their facial features.
> It is safe here.

Here, then, what begins as if an “issue” poem (as Adorno put it) – about spousal abuse? – offers us the utopia of a halcyonic shelter for battered women and their families, with light, clocks, dishes, entertainment (Carmen Miranda?). But also a place where children learn to hunt (a rebuke to the pacifist left which prefers to forget the inconsistencies of history?) with an

extraordinary satire on “user-friendly” radicalism: “Children may select their facial features.” But, as if to further torque the levels of plausibility – “It is safe here.”

The subject’s choice of its own body, of course, is part of the new, postmodern era of pay-with-plastic surgery: it is also, in Ross’s poem, seen as the subjectivity of hysterical demands: instead of safety, we get consumerism. But the blunt instruments with which I am interpreting Ross’s work should not mislead you into thinking that the writing is often unknowingly propagandistic.

For, as a photographic project that Ross undertook during repeated visits to Nicaraugua (an object of leftist fetishism during the early 80s, a time of anti-apartheid activism and Central American support committees), “Dead Cars,” demonstrates in its fine attention to decayed automobiles, Ross’s revolution is as much aesthetic as it is social. And just as Ross’s revolution lies between the aesthetic and the social, his poetics, those of Ross – Razovsky – lie between these two versions – the psychoanalytic and the political – of the tragic.

I want to finish up with a reflection on the irony of the small press, DIY, self-publishing world having a “Big Other,” a “Subject supposed to know,” as I argue with respect to Ross. With the current fetish for craft and Etsy-esque kitsch-punk, for decentralized entrepreneurialism and wiki-epistemology, however, has proceeded apace the ideological function of that neo-liberalism. As I argued recently writing on the poetry of Robert Manery in *Rain*, the ideology of anarchy, of libertarianism, of automatism and self-direction, only masks the practice of totalitarianism. Even small press must have a big king, and it is to Ross’s credit that his work never hesitates from underscoring its own arbitrariness.

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